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US sends reconnaissance jets to monitor Polish situation

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BRUSSELS—The United States is sending four AWACS reconnaissance planes to West Germany in a move Washington officials yesterday indicated was directly related to the Soviet threat to Poland.

The Soviet Union, with up to 400,000 men surrounding Poland, could invade before the West even knew that Moscow was ready to move, the chairman of NATO's military committee warned yesterday.

The converted Boeing 707s, with radar capable of probing hundreds of miles, were being sent from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma to Ramstein Air Base in West Germany.

The decision to deploy the planes was agreed on at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels attended by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and colleagues from 13 allied nations.

In addition to agreeing that improved surveillance and intelligence would give scant warning of a Soviet invasion, planners at the NATO meeting were concerned a move against Poland might disguise the beginning of an overall push against the West.

The ability of the Soviets to intervene in Poland is such that they can do it with very little warning indeed — hours, not days, and certainly not weeks," said Canada's Adm. Robert H. Falls.

"They are in a state of readiness now in which they can move practically so fast that we would hear about it almost after the event," he said at a meeting of North Atlantic Treaty Organization defense ministers.

Secretary of State Edmund Muskie was flying to Brussels later for a meeting of the NATO Council.

The defense ministers, who agreed

to increase vigilance but act carefully to avoid any inflammatory moves, were told the Soviet Union has 30 divisions with up to 400,000 men deployed around Poland.

"We recognize very clearly that it is a problem primarily for the Poles, but there are many scenarios... where it could spill out over into the concerns of the NATO countries," Falls said. "For that reason, I don't think we should just go on with business as usual."

The Pentagon did not link the dispatch of the reconnaissance jets — which have the capability of monitoring troop movements in and around Poland — to the Polish crisis, but other Administration officials indicated they were directly related.

A Pentagon statement said the four planes, similar to the four sent to Saudi Arabia several weeks ago after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, would start arriving at Ramstein today.

The defense ministers heard a detailed assessment of Soviet capabilities from Falls as well as from NATO's ground, sea and air commanders that one conference source said was "more than usually gloomy."

Officials said the ministers were told the Soviet Union has developed the capability to fight simultaneously in Europe, Central Asia and along the frontier with China.

Falls, stressing he was referring only to Soviet capabilities and not intentions, said it was "terribly important" that NATO "does not exacerbate the situation and adversely impact on the intentions of the Soviet Union."

Falls said NATO nations would be "keeping our eyes and ears open and maintaining a degree of alertness mentally and physically that would ensure we are not surprised by anything that might happen."